

Discuss the impact of Germany's foreign policy on the balance of power in Europe in the period 1870-1914.

Before discussing the impact of Germany's foreign policy on the balance of power in Europe in the period 1870-1914, I would like to define what the balance of power is. From the period 1870 to 1914, the balance of power can be defined as every nation, big or small, had the right to exist, and that no country should be too powerful to threaten the security of other countries. To be precise, the military equilibrium to be backed up by political, economic and diplomatic powers. General peace could be secured. During 1870-1914, Bismarck and Kaiser Williams II, who were in position of power in different periods, had a different approach towards foreign policy. The basis of Bismarck policy was to maintain the status quo while that of Kaiser William II was global aggrandizement in nature.

During 1870-1890, the real power, which determined the future destiny of Germany, was held in the hands of Bismarck. Experiencing the hardship of the unification, Bismarck had adopted a cautious policy. The basis of his foreign policy was to maintain the status quo in order to consolidate what Germany had gained after 1871. The core of his foreign policy was to isolate France, to avoid unnecessary conflicts and to keep peace between Russia and Austria. The "Bismarckian alliance system" was his agent to fulfill his aim.

Isolating France was the mainspring of his foreign policy. Bismarck firmly believed that France would be the troublemaker to Germany, since France had always wanted to take revenge on Germany after the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. Learning the lesson from History which Frederick the Great was defeated by a coalition of France in 1760, Bismarck was sure that isolating France was urgently necessary. He would also like to be sure that France would never be able to strike again. He had carried out three tasks in order to achieve this aim. Firstly, he supported republican movement in France, as this would make European monarchs suspicious of France. Secondly, he encouraged France to seek compensation for her losses through an active colonial policy so as to make France clash with other powers, for example, the Franco-Italian conflicts over Tunis. Thirdly, he tried to maintain peace between Russia and Austria, as he knew that if he alienated or had conflicts with either one, France would gain an ally effortlessly against Germany. With Bismarck's great efforts, France was made isolated during his reign. Originally, a permanently weak France, which her security was threatened, would upset the balance of power. However, France was strong enough to survive and even to compete with other great powers. Conversely,

Bismarck's policy had a positive effect on the balance of power in Europe as serious open conflicts between Germany and France was avoided. In other words, it had a stabilizing effect.

Bismarck was also careful of avoiding any unnecessary conflicts with others. One of the reasons is that any conflicts would hinder the newly born Germany to consolidate internally and externally. Besides, it would only benefit his rival, i.e. France. As if he had to alienate or quarrel with any powers, they would join France and form a coalition against Germany. Therefore, Bismarck had restrained Germany from colonial and navy expansion. As Bismarck stated himself, "I'm not a colony man." At that time, he just wanted to devote all his energies to strengthen Germany internally, so he tried not to engage Germany into any colonial rivalry. Besides, it would arouse British opposition because Germany needed navy to protect her colonies. Instead of developing the navy, Bismarck tried to consolidate Germany as the strongest continental power by developing the army. The effect of Bismarck's policy on the balance of power was also positive. Unnecessary conflicts between Britain and France were avoided.

Keeping peace between Russia and Austria was also one of his main tasks. There are two reasons made this aim essential. As mentioned before, if war broke out between Russia and Austria, Germany must be involved and one or other power would be bound to seek alliance with France. Besides, Austria also acted as a stable buffer state between Russia and Germany in southeast Europe and also a buffer against the demand of the Germany people for limitless expansion. If Austria disappeared, the conflict between Russia and Germany would exit and the German people would urge Bismarck for territorial expansion. In other words, the balance of power would be threatened. Therefore, even though Bismarck could not maintain a friendly relation between Russia and Austria, he would not let their relationship break down and he would still tried his best to prevent any wars between them. For example, The Dreikaiserbund of 1872 was formed to persuade the monarchs of Russia and Austria that they had a common interest greater than their conflicting aims. Besides, in the Bulgarian Crisis of 1885-87, the War Scare happened in 1886-87. War seemed likely between Russia and Austria. Bismarck knew that he could no long reconcile to both Austria's and Russia's wants at the same time and he was forced to make a choice between them. Finally, Bismarck chose Austria and revealed the secret Dual Alliance system between Germany and Austria, so that Russia would not attack Austria. In this sense, the effect of his policy was positive again as the survival of any countries were not threatened and wars were avoided between them. The balance of

power among the countries was stable.

In these years, Bismarck succeeded to control the European diplomacy in the interest of Germany. At the same time, he was also able to achieve the balance of power among the countries. Some historians looking back also agree that the powers at that time were in fact perfectly balanced that no single one could dominate the other. France feared Germany and Germany feared France. Austria feared Russia and distrusted her in the Balkans. Britain feared Russia in the East and Russia suspected any more intervention by Britain near the Strait of the Black Sea. It was true that no power could have set itself up against the others. It was Bismarck's contribution that his alliance system so tied up the European powers that none could remove without his permission. With the downfall of Bismarck in 1890 and the ascendancy of Kaiser William II, the German foreign policy changed sharply. It also resulted in a change of the balance of power.

The most remarkable change was that Kaiser William II pursued a global policy. He desired a place in the sun. In other words, he had an active colonial policy and active navy expansion. This had made Germany engaged into the colonial rivalries, for example, the Franco-German rivalry over Morocco in Africa, which led to the Moroccan Crises of 1905 and 1911, as well as the Anglo-German rivalry over the Boer Republics in South Africa. In order to protect his overseas colonies, Kaiser William II expanded the navy largely. The first and the second navy bill were passed in 1898 and 1900. His expansion in navy had led to the Anglo-German navy competition as well as a worsening of Anglo-German relationship. His policy had a negative effect in the balance of power in Europe as the constant empowerment of Germany in military and began to threaten the survival of other countries. The balance of power in Europe was not reached.

Besides, he gave up Russian friendship and he had no intention to renew the Reinsurance Treaty. The policy of maintaining peace between Austria and Russia no longer existed. This had driven Russia into the side of France and at the same time, Kaiser William II also preferred Austria only. It can be best seen from the Bosnian Crisis of 1908 that Germany supported Austrian ambition in the Balkans as well as the Sarajevo assassination that Germany offered a "blank cheque" to Austria. The encouragement of Austrian expansion had complicated the international circumstances and brought insecurity to Europe, which finally resulted in the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.

To conclude, German foreign policy was crucial to both the balance of power in Europe and the development of the World History. It could not be denied that Germany had been strengthened under the able leadership of Bismarck and Kaiser William II. However, though Bismarck can maintain the balance of power during the development of Germany, Kaiser William II failed. This had led to a disastrous consequence to Germany, and to the world as well.